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**Annetta T. Mills and the Origin of Deaf Education in China**  
**Annetta T. Mills et l'origine de l'éducation des personnes sourdes en Chine**

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**Abstract**

As the first education institution enrolling deaf children in China, the Chefoo School for the Deaf (which will be called “Chefoo School” in the rest of this article) was originally established by the American missionary couple Charles R. Mills and Annetta T. Mills. In the first decade of the twentieth century, the Chefoo School succeeded in attracting students across the country. For investigating Mills’s contributions to the proliferation of Chinese deaf education in a transnational context, this article will consist of the following three sections. The first section primarily discusses the early history of deaf education in China before the establishment of the Chefoo School in 1898. As early as the 1840s, Chinese elites had already gained firsthand knowledge of deaf education in the United States. Around the 1870s, American and French missionaries respectively proposed to establish a specific deaf school, which took care of deaf children in Shanghai but failed to provide special education to them. And then the second section of this article will examine Mills’s efforts to seek financial support from the transnational community of deaf education. The final section of this article will switch to Mills’s agenda of localizing deaf education in China, including training native teachers fostering the proliferation of deaf education in China and providing industrial training to Chinese deaf children.

**Résumé**

Le premier établissement d’enseignement qui a accueilli des enfants sourd·es en Chine, l’École Chefoo pour les personnes sourdes (que nous appellerons « École Chefoo » dans la suite de cet article), a été fondé par un couple de missionnaires des États-Unis, Charles R. Mills et Annetta T. Mills. Au cours de la première décennie du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle, l’École Chefoo a réussi à attirer des élèves des quatre coins de la Chine. Pour étudier les contributions de ses fondateur·rices à la prolifération de l’éducation des personnes sourdes en Chine dans un contexte transnational, cet article se divise en trois sections. La première section traite principalement des débuts de l’éducation des personnes sourdes en Chine avant la création de l’École Chefoo en 1898. Dès les années 1840, les élites chinoises avaient pu observer directement l’éducation des personnes sourdes aux États-Unis. Vers les années 1870, des missionnaires des États-Unis et de France proposèrent respectivement de créer une école spécifique pour les personnes sourdes, qui s’occupait des enfants sourd·es à Shanghai, mais ne leur offrait pas une éducation spécialisée. La deuxième section de cet article examine les efforts des Mills pour chercher du soutien financier auprès de la communauté transnationale de l’éducation des personnes sourdes. Enfin, la dernière section aborde la volonté des Mills d’adapter l’éducation des personnes sourdes à la Chine, y compris en formant du personnel enseignant local pour favoriser la prolifération de l’éducation des personnes sourdes en Chine et offrir une formation industrielle aux enfants sourd·es chinois·es.

**Key Words:** Annetta T. Mills, Chefoo, Deaf Education, Missionary

## **Introduction**

As the first education institution enrolling deaf children in China, the Chefoo School for the Deaf (which will be called the “Chefoo School” in the rest of this article) was originally established by the American missionary couple Charles R. Mills and Annetta T. Mills in 1898. In the first decade of the twentieth century, the Chefoo School succeeded in attracting students across the country. As Annetta T. Mills noted in 1908, “some of them (enrollees) come long distances and represent seven out of eighteen provinces of China” (Mills, 1908, p. 3). Regarding Annette Mills’s contribution to the proliferation of deaf education in China, some deaf scholars have demonstrated the significant role she played in establishing the Chefoo School and introducing American deaf education to Chinese society (Lytle, 2005, p. 461; Callaway, 2015, p. 97). However, they rarely talk about Mills and the Chefoo School’s intense connection within the proliferation of deaf education in China, which will be examined in this article.

Being trained as a disability historian after growing up in China, I have maintained a strong interest in the translational landscape of disability history. It is partly because, excluding some subjects such as insanity and madness, the representation of disabilities in East Asian countries is still outside the mainstream disability historians’ focus. Taking deaf history in China as an example, excluding Alison Callaway’s *Deaf Children in China*, there are few significant scholarly works regarding the history of deaf people and deafness in Chinese society. In tandem with the shortage of academic works regarding the Chinese history of disabilities, there are a limited number of historical works reflecting the past of people with disabilities in China, which motivates me to conduct this archival research for this article in the past summer. With the aim of figuring out the complete information of donors and the amount of donations to the Chefoo

School, I undertook archival research in the Gallaudet University Library in Washington, D. C. In its Special Collections, I fortunately found the extended files of historical newspapers, pamphlets, and magazines, which reflect the dynamic perception of the Chinese deaf and the progress of the Chefoo School.

Based on such rich primary sources, this article intends to investigate Mills's contributions to the proliferation of China's deaf education in a transnational context in the following three sections. The first section primarily discusses the early history of deaf education in China before the establishment of the Chefoo School in 1898. As early as the 1840s, Chinese elites had already gained firsthand knowledge of deaf education in the United States. Around the 1870s, American and French missionaries respectively proposed to establish a specific deaf school, which took care of deaf children in Shanghai but failed to provide special education to them. The second section of this article will examine Mills's efforts to seek financial support from the transnational community of deaf education. The final section of this article will switch to Mills's agenda of localizing deaf education in China, including training native teachers fostering the proliferation of deaf education in China and providing industrial training to Chinese deaf children. Considering the significant contributions Mills made to the proliferation of deaf education in China and its impact on deaf children in Korea and Japan, she should be acclaimed as the founder of special education in East Asia.

## **Section I**

For elite intellectuals in early-twentieth-century Chinese society, deaf education was not strange. Yung Wing, who was the first Chinese person taking higher education in the United States, established social networks with prominent American deaf teachers in the 1840s. When

he was studying at Yale, New England was the stronghold of education in the United States. As seen in his autobiography, one of the first friends he made when he came to America in 1848, was David E. Bartle, “a professor in the New York Asylum for the Deaf and Dumb and was afterward connected with an institution in Hartford”( Wing, 1916, p. 39). Meanwhile, the personal connection between Wing and the founder of the Gallaudet University Thomas H. Gallaudet could be traced back to the same period. As seen in Wing’s memoir, “during the winter vacation of 1848,” American missionary S. R. Brown invited him to visit Dr. Gallaudet’s house(Wing, 1916, p. 48). However, the encounters with the pioneering deaf teacher did not raise Wing’s awareness of the significance of educating deaf people. Despite his achievement in sending the Chinese exchange students to educational institutions in the United States, Wing did not take any interest in providing equal opportunities in education to deaf children in China.

Partly because of elite intellectuals’ disregard of deaf children’s needs in Chinese society, they lived in a plight in the late nineteenth century. As an American missionary observed, any deaf boy in China “[was] regarded as one upon whom the gods have frowned; he is teased and ill-treated by all the boys in his native village; he is sent out to beg or to gather grass and roots for fuel if his parents are poor, and hidden if the family is one”(Roe, 1917, p. 381). Regarding the underlying reason for mistreating deaf children in China, the renowned American deaf-blind activist Helen Keller contended it was “because the Chinese believe that deafness is a punishment for some wrong done in a previous state of existence”(School for the Deaf, 1908, p. 5). Obviously, Keller’s explanation blamed the loss of care and education for Chinese deaf children on the superstition in their home society.

Observing the plight of deaf children in China, Western missionaries took sympathy with them. Following the prevalent model of educating deaf children with sign language and other

skills in American society, some missionaries proposed to build deaf schools in China. In 1875, China-based missionary Jonathan Fisher Crossett sent a letter to Edward M. Gallaudet “for making an earnest appeal for the establishment of an institution for the deaf and dumb in that country”(Anonymous, 1875, p. 256). Nonetheless, Crossett did not take this plan into account. Prior to Crossett, French missionaries established a specific institution for taking care of deaf children in the 1860s. During her trip in Shanghai in 1906, Mills visited “the French convent,” in which “the nuns had a class of deaf children and I wanted to see their work.” Witnessing the shortage of professional deaf teachers there, she criticized those French missionaries’ teaching as a “clear case of insufficient training” (Anonymous, 1906,p. 3).

In contrast with her French peers without professional training in deaf education, Mills came to China as a skilled deaf teacher. Before marrying Charles R. Mills, she “had worked for several years as a teacher in the School for the Deaf in Rochester, N. Y” (Forsyth, 1912, p. 31).Pioneering in deaf education in the United States, the Deaf School in Rochester also successfully trained many deaf teachers. Benefited by her experience of teaching deaf children in Rochester, Mills attempted to "transplant" the most recent theories and practices of deaf education from America to China. Mills “used A. M. Bell's visible speech symbols to denote the sounds of Chinese characters, and Edmund Lyon's manuals to denote the speech symbols” in the Chefoo School (Zhou, 1980, p. 209). A prominent outcome of Mills’s utilization of Bell and Lyon’s symbols in the Chefoo School was the first Chinese sign language textbook. Hence, when Mills and her husband determined to establish a special school for Chinese deaf children, she had adequate knowledge and skills in providing high-quality courses to them.

In light of the obsolete and distorted perception of deafness and the deaf in traditional Chinese society, it was urgent to introduce modern deaf education to enlighten and emancipate

deaf children in this country. Thanks to Mills's professional background in educating children with special needs, she could not only "take care of" deaf children but also teach them survival skills and knowledge. However, the development of her enterprise of deaf education in China was hindered by the shortage of qualified teachers and financial support, which will be examined in the following section of this article.

## **Section II**

Throughout her career in supervising the Chefoo School, Mills was occupied with seeking stable and continuing financial resources for the maintenance of the Chefoo School. As important dimensions of globalization of deaf education, the transference of financial support and transplantation of American deaf education constituted the two significant dimensions of the expansion of the transnational deaf community, which will be intensely examined in the following section.

Affiliating to the Presbyterian Church, Mills's and her husband's early services among Chinese people in Chefoo were supported by its branch in China. Working as a medical missionary, Charles Mills provided biomedical therapy to poor residents in China and devoted his life to rescuing them from diseases and death. Most of his services were supported by the local branch of the Presbyterian Church in Shandong Province. As an exception, Mills's proposal for establishing a deaf school in China was refuted by the Church. By contrast, the Church desired to provide financial support for building other kinds of missionary schools. Despite its generosity in helping the "able-bodied" Chinese, the Church took a lower priority of helping children with disabilities yet. For example, Mills sent a request for financial aid from the Board of Foreign Missions [of the Presbyterian Church] in New York" for the maintenance of the

Chefoo School in 1905. However, the Board “declined to assist her,” because it thought the project worthless. Due to the frustration that she encountered in seeking financial support from the church, Mills had to switch to the American deaf community. According to her testimony, the maintenance of the Chefoo School initially “has been depending almost solely upon the contributions of the deaf of America and England and their friends” (Mills, 1908, p. 3).

The main reason why the deaf and deaf teachers were willing to help Mills was that, following the proliferation of deaf education in the postbellum United States, pioneering American deaf teachers attempted to expand their enterprise to the rest of the world. Originating in Western Europe, modern deaf education was imported into the United States in the 1810s. “Before the founding in 1817 of the American School for the Deaf in Hartford, Connecticut, deaf people in the United States lived within an inaccessible hearing world, separated from their own kind” (Burch, 2004, p. 10). Thriving in the postbellum period, American deaf education maintained international connections with deaf education in European countries and attempted to expand to other countries. As a skilled deaf teacher, Mills utilized the network of deaf schools in seeking financial support. Owing to Mills’s consistent efforts to seek financial support from the American deaf community, many deaf schools desired to aid her with the maintenance of the Chefoo School. For instance, the superintendent of the Kentucky School for the Deaf sent a letter in 1903, “with an enclosure of a check for \$20.00, a contribution to the Chefoo School from their Christian Endeavor Society” (Anonymous, 1904, p. 90). In the same year, H. E. Hamilton, who served as the editor-in-chief of *The Silent Workers*, took “the sum of \$183.00 or thirty-seven pounds, nine shillings, six pence, or \$440.84 Mexican, as a donation to the Chefoo School (Anonymous, 1903, p. 6). Their generous donations saved Mills and the Chefoo School from bankruptcy and also made it familiar with American deaf educators as “Mrs. Mills’s School.”



In the meantime, the Chefoo School also maintained strong connections with deaf communities in other Western countries. In 1905, Mills “visited England, Ireland, and Scotland, and received much encouragement and some substantial assistance from friends interested in the work”(Anonymous, 1910, p. 163). Moreover, Mills succeeded in joining Canadian deaf teachers in the augmented donors in the 1910s. As she reported, “the deaf of Canada find their representative in Mrs. Win. Watt, whom they have authorized to collect for the Chefoo School” (Anonymous, 1910, p. 515). Thanks to their transnational donations, the Chefoo School maintained its philanthropic promise on exempting its Chinese deaf students’ tuition and accommodations.

In addition to receiving financial support from deaf schools across the world, the Chefoo School also recruited deaf children from other Asian countries. As early as the 1910s, it began to recruit non-Chinese deaf students from Japan and Korea under the Japanese colonial regime. Similar to Chinese society, deaf education was also a new thing for Japanese society in the late nineteenth century. The history of deaf education in Japan could “[date] back to 1878 when pioneering education for blind and deaf children was started” (Misawa, 1994, p. 221). However, in both Japan and Korea, the number of deaf schools and teachers was still limited in the early twentieth century, so some Japanese and Korean deaf children studied in the Chefoo School. In 1910 and 1924, it recruited “one from Korea” and “five Japanese deaf orphans” (Anonymous, 1924, p. 7). In the meantime, the Chefoo School trained native deaf teachers in advocacy of the proliferation of deaf education in Asian countries. In 1909, “a hearing Korean man and his wife received instructions in methods of teaching the deaf during the year, and they now report a school at Pyongyang with several pupils in attendance” (Anonymous, 1905, p. 45). Hence, Mills made a significant contribution to the expansion of modern deaf education in Asian countries

Additionally, Mills also disseminated knowledge of Chinese deaf children in American society. In the 1910s, Chinese deaf and blind girl, Feng Ying (sometimes spelled as “Fung Ying”), acclaimed as the “Chinese Helen Keller,” was sent to an American deaf school. Born in Guangdong Province, Ying “lost both sight and hearing through smallpox” when she was a little child. Because Ying has ever recovered hearing for a time, “she was sent to the Lutheran Hildesheim Mission for Blind Girls at Kowloon near Hong Kong” (Anonymous, 1910, p. 12). However, the recovery of her hearing capacity was only temporary. Becoming deaf again, Ying was sent to the Chefoo School. The “blind, deaf, and dumb girl” became the first to be taught in China” (Anonymous, 1914, p. 58). Along with the dissemination of Feng Ying's story in printed media in America, it drew intense attention to her plight.

On the ground of the mutual and transnational connection between the Chefoo School and the community of deaf education, it was not a one-way inflow of financial support and teaching staff. By raising financial support from the Western countries, enrolling international deaf students, and training deaf teachers from Korea and Japan Mills, Mills brought China into the extended transnational deaf community.

### **Section III**

In addition to integrating Chinese deaf children into the expanding transnational deaf community, Mills was also engaged in localizing deaf education in China. The following section will mainly investigate her agenda of localization in the following dimensions: training and hiring Chinese deaf teachers, promotion of deaf education in China, and providing vocational training for deaf students in the Chefoo School.

Dedicated to educating deaf children in China, Mills maintained her interest in seeking skilled American deaf teachers. Taking systematic training in deaf education, American teachers were indeed the ideal candidates for teaching Chinese deaf children in the Chefoo School. As seen in her report to the Executive Committee of the Presbyterian Missionary Society, “we hope to increase our foreign staff by the addition of three foreign teachers—one teacher of trades; also, a matron.” However, the cost of hiring foreign teachers, which would cause “\$2,800.00 of an increase over the present expenditure,” was unaffordable for the school’s stringent budget. (Mills, 1908. p. 86). Before her retirement in 1923, Mills only successfully hired one non-Chinese teacher, her nephew Anita E. Carter. She finally succeeded Mills as the superintendent of the Chefoo School. Without the capacity of hiring American teachers for the maintenance of the Chefoo School, Mills had to localize its teacher team. Teaching assistants and teachers affiliated with the Chefoo School mainly consisted of its Chinese alumni and graduates from teacher colleges in China.

Even so, Mills persisted in her enterprise of educating Chinese deaf children. Entering the twentieth century, her achievements raised local officials’ interest in deaf education. In 1909, “the school received a visit from H. E. the Governor of Shantung. He was very interested in what he saw, and he expressed a wish that similar schools might be opened soon in other parts of China” Christian Literature Society for China (Christian Literature Society for China, 1910, p. 32). Coinciding with local officials’ rising interest in developing deaf education, Mills took her efforts to attract governmental support. “With two of her pupils and Mrs. Sen,” Mills took a “3000-mile” journey throughout China to seek partners to open the first government-sponsored deaf school in China” (E. A. F., 1910, p. 13). Finally, she succeeded in reversing the Chinese government’s attitude to deaf education; it established an official deaf school in 1909. It was

supervised by “Mr. Sen Dzong Shi, one of the native teachers trained at the Chefoo School” (Anonymous, 1910, p. 52). Before supervising the new school, he “had been in the Chefoo school for ten years.” in which “he assisted Mills with teaching Chinese deaf children” (Christian Literature Society for China, 1910, p. 51). Following the model of the first deaf school supervised by a Chinese, “several other schools have been opened” between the 1910s and early 1920s (Mills, 1921, p. 51). As the Chefoo School’s alumnus Tien Fu Tse pointed out in 1922, excluding the Chefoo School as the first, there were six deaf schools in China: “the second at Hangchow, the third at Kucheng, the fourth at Nan Tungchow, the fifth at Peking and the sixth at Shanghai” (Tse, 1922, p. 28).

Considering these schools’ close connection with the Chefoo School, it has already evolved to a network of deaf education in the early 1910s. Amongst these schools, “the second at Hangchow” was supervised by Tse himself. As an inborn deaf person, Tse was sent by his father, who was “employed in the Chinese Imperial customs in Tientsin and had heard by way of England of the school for the deaf at Chefoo,” to the Chefoo School (Anonymous, 1915, p. 31). Appreciating Mills’s efforts to educate deaf children like his son, this Chinese customs official built the deaf school in Hangzhou, in which Chinese deaf children were taught in different subjects. As Tse reported in 1925, “our teaching staff includes my second brother Tien Si, who teaches lip-reading, and my third brother, Tien Zen, who teaches drawing. Mr. Hae teaches the Bible” (Anonymous, 1925, p. 21). All the teachers mentioned above were graduates from the Chefoo School. In addition to Tse's school, "the fourth at Nan Tungchow" in the quote was opened by “the ex-Commissioner of Commerce and Agriculture, Chang Kien, who is greatly interested in education” (Mills, 1921, p. 71). Teachers in this school also mainly consisted of

graduates from the Chefoo School. In the 1920s, Mills's former Chinese students have already been able to independently lead deaf education in their home country.

Furthermore, Mills's efforts to localize deaf education in China was embodied in providing industrial training for deaf children in the Chefoo School. In the late nineteenth century, training deaf children with industrial skills for their survival constituted an integral part of deaf education in the United States. "In the early twentieth century, even as courses on lipreading and speech prevailed over traditional academic departments, vocational training expanded. In 1905, fifty-four of the fifty-seven state deaf schools had vocational departments" (Burch, 2004, p. 24). Following the American model, Mills also created vocational training programs in the Chefoo School, which prevented Chinese deaf children from dependence and destitution. As discussed earlier in this article, American missionaries observed the prominence of deaf beggars on the streets in China. To prevent her students from the plight, Mills set the goal of self-independence for training students in the Chefoo School. As she addressed in 1904, "the aim of the school is not only to teach reading and writing but to fit the boys for life and its responsibility" (Anonymous, 1904, p. 72). As a result, deaf children in the Chefoo School were required to take industrial training. As an American missionary observed, "industrial training is given to every child, and special effort is made to prepare each for self-support" in the Chefoo School. Being trained in different skills, students in the Chefoo School learned to become weavers, tailors, and carpenters. As reported in the annual report of the Presbyterian Church, "the boys making bamboo reeds for cloth weaving, doing carpentry work and grading the premises; the girls doing lace and sewing work" (Anonymous, 1918. p. 31). Thanks to a variety of vocational training programs in the Chefoo School, its graduates successfully found jobs in factories, press, and other institutions.

Considering the progress of the Chefoo School in enrolling an increasing number of local students and hiring more Chinese teachers, Mills indeed promoted the localization of deaf education in China. Cultivating the “seed” of deaf education in the Chefoo School, Mills finally harvested sufficient “fruit” of the expanding network of deaf schools supervised by its graduates and their families. In all these schools, the popularization of industrial training successfully realized her dream of rescuing Chinese deaf children from the plight in their home community.

## **Conclusion**

Reviewing Annetta T. Mills’s achievement in educating deaf children in the Chefoo School, it is possible that she founded modern deaf education in China. Through reaching out to deaf schools in the Western countries for financial support and recruiting deaf students from East Asian countries, Mills served as a mediator between deaf education originated in the West and its recipients in the East. For the developing deaf education in North America and Western Europe, Mills made a significant contribution to its expansion in Asian countries. On the other hand, Mills not only rescued deaf children who were neglected in their home society, from the plight but also fostered many native deaf teachers who promoted the localization of education in the twentieth-century Chinese society.

Moreover, this investigation of Mills and the Chefoo School also reaffirms the significance of integrating Asian countries into the expanding scope of deaf history studies. Regarding the origin(s) of modern deaf education and the formation of deaf culture(s) in Asia, there are a limited number of academic discussions. This article tentatively discusses the origin of deaf education in China and expects to foster the proliferation of academic works regarding this issue in other Asian countries.

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